

Let Lithuania Go

WASHINGTON

As Soviet diplomat buttonholed me to say he had read my book about Lincoln — and wasn't there a remarkable similarity between the challenge of secession that Lincoln faced in 1861 and the challenge Mikhail Gorbachev faces from the Baltic secessionists today? How could I square support of Lincoln's decision to preserve the Union with my incendiary column titled "Free the Baltics"?

I told him the parallel he was attempting to draw was ill informed and dangerous (adding that I knew Abe Lincoln, he was a friend of mine, and that Gorbachev was no Lincoln).

Of the Southern American states seeking to secede, only one — Texas — had ever been an independent republic, and all had entered into union voluntarily. But in the case of the three Baltic republics, each had been an independent nation until seized by the Soviet Union as a result of the infamous Molotov-von Ribbentrop pact.

Therefore, any Soviet "integrity of the Union" justification was based on a false analogy. Free people and states can bind themselves into an indissoluble union, but no such contract applies to states coerced, conquered and held captive.

That "Free the Baltics" fulmination ran only 10 months ago; in a subsequent visit to one of the Baltic nations (which afforded the opportunity for the dateline "Riga, Soviet-Occupied Latvia") I asked to see a leader of the popular front pressing for freedom. His associates said he was busy that week working on a draft of a statement that would lead, after the March 1990 elections, to a declaration of independence.

That was a stopper; if this were 1776, would I have said "Look, tell Mr. Jefferson to set aside that when-in-the-course-of-human-events stuff because a bigfoot pundit wants to see him"? Fortunately, that routine was unnecessary because the Latvian leader recognized the need for any support from America.

Loud, unwavering, insistent support for the rectification of a Stalin-Hitler wrong is central to the cause of freedom inside and adjacent to the Soviet Union. The fax machine is the secret weapon of independency's new committees of correspondence.

Even after the freeing of other nations of Eastern and Central Europe, Baltic subjugation remains the most damning evidence of Stalinist expansionism. Latvia is the Baltic state most "Russianized" by immigration, and is accordingly moving most cautiously; Lithuania, however, remains 80 percent Lithuanian, and is in the vanguard of self-liberation.

Having last week declared its independence, Lithuania is now being subjected to a war of nerves by Mr. Gorbachev. Russian armored troop carriers rumble through the streets of Vilnius. Moscow ordered that phone lines to the outside world be cut, and journalists and tourists denied entry; shotguns have been ordered confiscated from hunters and farmers who have not even threatened to take up arms.

The Lithuanians are not knuckling under. When General Taruiskis, the commander of volunteer civil defense forces, began meekly to comply with the roundup of arms and to turn over 16,000 vehicles, Lithuanian deputies moved to replace him.

Nobody in newly free Lithuania is threatening violence; that would be self-defeating. The only person getting into position for the use of force is Mr. Gorbachev: he proposes to rip the shotguns out of the hands of peaceful Lithuanians (thereby inviting the violence leading to crackdown) while

End the 'phony war.'

telling the world he is merely disarming them to avert violence.

The Soviet leader last week gained the power to declare martial law and rule by decree; will he use it? A curious version of this question was asked of Mr. Bush yesterday: "Does it seem to you that he has the political ability to let Lithuania go?" (The President's reply, based on deep C.I.A. analysis: "I honestly don't know.")

I think Mr. Gorbachev, superczar, now has both the power to crack down and to not crack down. If he were a strategic planner, a chess player, he might view Baltic independence as the prelude to a greater problem of disintegration in the Ukraine — and be tempted to provoke suppressible violence now, gambling on flaccid Western "understanding" on the false Lincoln analogy.

If he is a brilliant improviser, as I fervently hope, Mr. Gorbachev will find a way to get angry and throw the Lithuanians out of the Soviet Union. Latvia and Estonia would follow, and he would continue to enjoy bankable international popularity.

Provoking violence in the name of confiscating arms is a transparent trick. Forget it, Mr. Gorbachev; continued Baltic rule is pure Stalinist adventurism. Let Lithuania go. □